Focusing on the Big Picture: Higher versus Lower Order Concerns

When you’re reading someone’s draft, it is hard to resist the urge to copyedit, to read line-by-line fixing punctuation errors and suggesting word changes as you go. However, when you’re reading an early draft, a draft in which the writer is still developing ideas and trying to find the best organizational structure for their papers, such nit-picky comments simply aren’t helpful. In fact, they detract attention away from big priorities to focus instead on trivial details. It’s like pointing out that someone missed a button when in fact their shirt is on inside-out. And they forgot to put on pants.

Instead, you should focus on what are known as higher order concerns, “big picture” concerns about the writer’s ideas and the paper’s structure. Once the writer has a handle on the “big picture” stuff, it is then appropriate to start looking at lower order concerns like spelling, punctuation, and word choice.

Following is a list of higher order concerns with questions you should ask yourself as you’re reading a paper. I recommend that you read the paper straight through once to determine what to prioritize in your response and then read it again, this time making marks and suggestions in the form of comments in the margins and/or a summary comment at the end.

Main Idea/Thesis

• What is the point of the paper? What question or idea do you think the writer wants the reader to take away? Is the main idea clear enough that you could summarize it in a sentence or two? Can you identify a place in the paper (probably in or close to the introduction) where the writer states the thesis clearly? If there is a clear thesis, underline it. If the thesis is implied, write out a 1-2 sentence summary of the paper in your own words.

• If you cannot locate a thesis statement or if the thesis statement is incomplete, misleading, or unclear, write a note indicating this to the writer. If you locate a thesis, but it seems out of synch with what the paper actually discusses, then again, write a note to the writer explaining what you think the paper is actually about.

Content Development

• If you were able to determine the paper’s thesis, is it adequately developed? For example, if the paper is making an argument, did the writer provide enough support to persuade you of their point? If the paper is describing an issue, process, or thing, do you feel like you fully understand what is being described?

• You can address content development as you read by noting places in the text where you would like to see more information or elaboration on ideas. You can also address this in a comment at the end of the paper by suggesting further points the writer should consider addressing and/or by listing questions you as a reader would like to see answered within the text.
**Paragraph Development**

- Does each paragraph have a clear purpose and main idea? Often, writers will use topic sentences to state their main ideas clearly. As you read each paragraph, try to identify a topic sentence, or, if one is lacking, to identify the paragraph’s implied main idea. If you can identify one, determine if each sentence in the paragraph supports the main idea. Note places where more explanation, evidence, description, and/or definition are needed to fully elaborate upon the main idea of each paragraph.

- If you had trouble identifying a paragraph’s purpose and main idea, you might help the writer organize better by noting what you as a reader were expecting the paragraph to be about given its place in the essay. If the paragraph makes multiple points, you might suggest breaking it up into multiple paragraphs and even suggest the order in which the writer might want to organize those paragraphs.

**Organization**

- As you’re reading the paper, does it seem like ideas are building on each other? Has the writer made the paper’s structure clear through use of transitional words or phrases?

- Note places where it feels like the topic has shifted abruptly from one paragraph to the next. Jot down the main ideas of each paragraph on a separate sheet of paper as you go. Do these main ideas build toward the paper’s thesis? Can you suggest a different organizational structure?

**Introduction/Conclusion**

- Does the paper have a clear beginning that establishes context for the rest of the paper? Does the ending give a sense of completion, for example by re-emphasizing the main point, underscoring the importance of the subject, or looking toward the future?

- Conclusions of academic essays often re-state the paper’s main idea. They can also look to the future or underscore the significance of the paper’s topic. You can help the writer by noting what you as a reader took from the paper. How did the paper influence your thinking on the subject? You might also note why you think the topic is important to the paper’s intended audience.